DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 091 690 CS 201 265

AUTHOR Mills, Helen
TITLE The Way Between.
PUB DATE 73
NOTE 7p.; Unpublished paper prepared at American River College

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; *Composition (Literary); Composition Skills (Literary); Creative Writing; Descriptive Writing; English Instruction; Expository Writing; Grammar; Sentence Structure; Syntax; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

As an alternative to the conflict among college composition teachers who are either repressive and authoritarian or permissive and lenient, a middle course offers teachers the latitude of encouraging free writing for some students and directed writing for other students, both of which may be responses to students' needs to express themselves. This approach recognizes the differences in language ability discussed by James Deese in "Psycholinguistics," who associates formal, highly structured speech with middle and upper classes, and restricted speech of limited syntax with the lower class. With the guided method, the teacher aids students both in learning sentence structure, grammar, and syntax, and in developing evaluative judgment and self-confidence. Free writing advocates may use the Ken Macrorie method of requesting spontaneous writing for a specified length of time, emphasizing the avoidance of phony pretentious language. A fine balance is necessary between encouraging creativity and imposing discipline as needed by students for realizing their potential. (JM)

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 091690

"The trick, Fletcher, is that we are trying to overcome our limitations in order, patiently. We don't tackle flying through rock until a little later in the program."

-Jonathan Livingston Seagull

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Helen Mills

TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

THE WAY BETWEEN

by Helen Mills

Although college students have asked, even demanded, that they be recognized as individuals and not as part of a mass of students sitting passively in a classroom, some teachers have remained lecturers, authoritarian dispensers of information and F's while others have relinquished their positions and have allowed students to do their own thing with very little guidance. The response to the demand for change, then, has brought about a dichotomy, identified by Abraham Edel, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York - Graduate Center, as the conflict of the repressive and permissive, of discipline and creativity. This kind of conflict is apparent among college composition teachers, some of whom emphasize the correctness of a paper and minimize the importance of the content while others ask students to write whatever comes to mind without being concerned about structure and the mechanics of language. However, there are still other teachers who have found a middle course. They recognize their students' individual differences

CS 201 265

© 1973 by Helen Mills

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

in abilities to use language effectively and gear their programs to meet them. Acting as tutors, diagnosticians, and counselors, these teachers encourage free writing for some students, but for others they use a guided approach.

The reasons for these differences in abilities to use language are explored in Psycholinguistics by James Deese, who looks at language from the linguistic, psychological, and sociological viewpoints. Beginning with the statement that "a language is a set of sentences," he traces the development of language from infancy to adulthood and emphasizes several times the need for adult stimulation in the growth of a child's normal linguistic function. Without it, he says, "children are retarded both in linguistic and motor development. Special training for these children later on seems to help make up some but not all the defect." He discusses a 1961 study by Basil Bernstein, English sociologist, who found that middle and upper class people use what he calls a formal style -- careful speech, highly structured, because "these people play intellectual games with language." As a result, it becomes analytic as well as descriptive and deals with abstractions in intricate detail. In contrast, restricted or public language, the speech mode of the lower class with a limited syntax serves mainly for descriptions, and speakers, having little motivation to make meaning clear, find it difficult to state analytic arguments and abstractions within its limits. Deese questions whether Bernstein exaggerates the possible stylistic differences but concedes there are gradations of style which can be characterized by the two extremes. It would seem, then, that the student from the middle or upper class family would do well writing spontaneously and discovering his own style because he has lived with and used a language with which he can express his ideas. The deprived student, on the other hand, has limited language experience to call on when he tries to write pages of his thoughts. He may know what he feels and wants to say, but he experiences great frustra-

tion because he cannot begin to put the necessary words on paper. This is the student, then, who can profit from the guided approach if he wants to learn.

Deese substantiates this idea as he discusses a study by Lenneberg (1967), who believes, after gathering evidence of the effects of brain damage on linguistic abilities, that the primary development of language comes to an end some time around puberty but that further changes in language are entirely the result of learning. Lenneberg says further that a person who has not acquired the ability to use language effectively by his middle twenties probably will never acquire it.

In comparing the language of children and adults, Deese discusses findings of other studies. One, for example, is that children's early sentences are short because the children's memory span is short. Even though adults produce long, complicated sentences, children are able to understand them by simplifying them, breaking them into smaller parts. However, Deese points out, "The development of elaborate sentence structure is a necessity." The growing child adds more and more words to his sentences just as the traveler feels the need to learn more of a foreign language as the phrase book becomes very limited. He says, in addition, that "...the motivation for elaboration of syntactic structures is not so much functional as it is simply the result of internal pressure to that for which the species is natively adapted." Both the free writing and guided writing, then, can be responses to the students' needs to express themselves.

Advocates of free writing may use the Ken Macrorie approach and ask students to begin by writing anything that comes to mind for ten minutes. Later they may take fifteen to thirty minutes for this kind of spontaneous writing. What they try to avoid, according to Macrorie, is "the phony, pretentious language of the schools -- Engfish," the source of which probably was earlier training

when students were supposed to learn "correct" English, rigidly taught with no room for disagreement or variation. The teachers who have used (perhaps still use) this devastating approach do not have to bear the entire burden of responsibility, however, because often they have been following school district dictates, teaching as they had been trained in college methods classes by professors who had not been in the classroom for twenty years, or trying desperately to fulfill an assignment as an English teacher even though they might be life science or math majors. With little insight into the marvels and flexibilities of language, it is no wonder that they have clung desperately to right and wrong answers for grammar lessons and required as few writing assignments as possible because they have not been sure how to grade a paper. Students who have sat through these classes either have learned "Engfish" well or hated all English courses and have arrived in college ready to cross swords with instructors teaching required English courses. Parents also have either hampered or favorably influenced students' language development. If the parents themselves lack language skills or hate English, teachers face the extra burden of helping students overcome a negative attitude. The college teacher, then, is challenged to liberate these students, and he may try Macrorie's way.

Or he may use a guided approach, exemplified by Sheridan Baker, Francis Christensen, and John Mellon, to help students understand the characteristics of sentence and essay so that they can use the patterns as they write papers for other college classes. Although some teachers and students find this approach confining compared to Macrorie's way, it is a descriptive method, not a prescriptive one. It is a map showing students the route to follow if they want to produce a written piece identified as an expository essay; if they choose not to follow the format, they may still be able to satisfy writing requirements in some classes, but not in others. Or if they are fairly capable

writers when they enter the composition class, they may be able to refine their writing style by acquiring new techniques to make their papers effective. They may, for example, learn to use constructions seldom found in spoken language, according to Andrew MacLeish, University of Minnesota. These include participial modifiers, infinitive and absolute phrases, and noun clauses at the beginning of a sentence to embed an idea rather than express it in a subordinate clause or another sentence, and they may accomplish greater economy by using nonrestrictive modifiers and appositives. Pointing out that speaking and writing are fundamentally different, MacLeish says that "the writer has an obligation to great accuracy; the reader demands more exactness because writing is edited and permanent. Speech, on the other hand, is unplanned, improvised, and temporary. We can conclude, then, that only immature writing follows patterns of spoken English. To 'write as you hear it and speak it' is not altogether a good maxim....Thus, the interference of speech in writing is one of the major problems in composition teaching....Accordingly the composition course must impart specific skills in using devices employed in good written English. Without giving editing priority over the more basic process of free writing, the composition teacher should aim at increasing sensitivity to structure and to alternatives to structure."

For the student who is afraid to touch a pen to paper, the guided method is a "security blanket" and just as liberating as Macrorie's free writing. As he writes sentences and learns about the characteristics of acceptable sentences by studying grammar and syntax, he begins to develop a sense of judgment for evaluating his own writing and, as a result, gains self-confidence. If the study of grammar and syntax is descriptive, it is relevant to writing because it helps the student understand relationship of words within sentences, the embedding of ideas, and ways to manipulate language to serve the student's needs. What other alternative has he for learning about language if he has grown up

using only restricted or public language as described by Bernstein?

Although Macrorie's approach seems to be unstructured, it is not. In the first three chapters Macrorie urges students to write freely, find their voice, forget the rigidity of the theme, but in Chapter 4, called "Tightening," he asks them to edit what they write, become discerning about what is effective. In the next chapters students are to learn to work with factual details and argumentation in chapters called "Telling Facts," "Fabulous Realities," "Criticizing," and "Oppositions," techniques also discussed by Baker. In addition, Macrorie assumes students have a knowledge of grammar as he talks about metaphorical verbs, parallel constructions, passive voice, and other technicalities of language. And he expects them to observe the conventions of punctuation and to know the appropriate forms for writing footnotes and bibliographies for scholarly papers. Not surprisingly, his book ends with generally the same kind of information Baker imparts. They are both trying to help students learn to write competently and effectively, just as the teachers are who adopt these texts.

Maintaining a fine balance, then, between encouraging creativity and imposing discipline as it is needed for each students seems to be a realistic way to help students realize their potential. Expressing this same idea, Dr. Edel writes, "The history of science, literature, music, and other arts suggests that cultural innovation takes place not by rejecting disciplined techniques, but by developing new techniques after having mastered the old." The student, then, can become creative if he is helped to develop a foundation for his creativity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baker, Sheridan. The Complete Stylist. New York: Thomas Y Crowell Company, 1966.

Christensen, Francis. The Christensen Rhetoric Program. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.

Deese, James. Psycholinguistics. New York: Allyn & Bacon, Inc., 1970.

Edel, Abraham. "Value Conflict and the Higher Learning," The Humanist, March/April, 1973, pp. 23-28.

MacLeish, Andrew. "Some Structures for Written English," English Journal, September, 1969, pp. 877-891.

Macrorie, Kenneth. Telling Writing. New York: Haydon Book Company, Inc., 1970.

Mellon, John C. Transformational Sentence-Combining. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969.